

# Back To Black

Considering the Long Playing record's recent renaissance, Adam Smith auditions six of the best sub-£1,500 turntables...

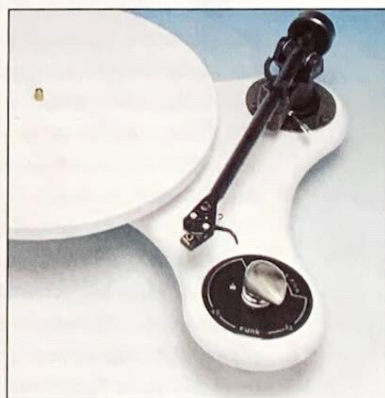
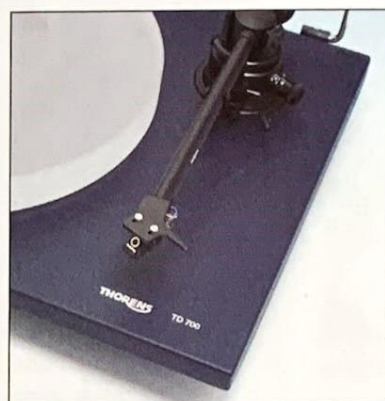
**W**hether you are gladdened, amused, indifferent or unaware, the fact is that vinyl is back with a vengeance. Indeed even we here at the magazine have been surprised by the way sales of both software and hardware, for playing this classic technology that we have campaigned so tirelessly to promote, have taken off in the past couple of years.

New turntables seem to be popping up everywhere, new vinyl releases are becoming ever more plentiful, and no longer just from the bands who thought it was 'trendy' to bring out an LP version of their latest album. Now, a great many new releases are getting a bite of the vinyl cherry, and in some cases, such as with Robert Plant and Alison Krauss's superb 'Raising Sand' album, go to a second pressing due to popular demand...

Speaking to a digital-loving acquaintance the other day, I was surprised to hear that he has invested in a turntable, and his reason for doing so is that he came to the conclusion that there is so much material that has still not been released on CD, and is equally unlikely to be dragged from the digital vaults onto the likes of iTunes, that he felt investing in an LP spinner would give him the best access to the widest range of music.

There's never been a better time in recent memory to buy a turntable, as there hasn't been so much choice of models since analogue's heyday back in the nineteen seventies. As we've been pointing out in the past eighteen months or so, there seem to be more new turntable releases from manufacturers than there are CD players, and the latest GfK sales figures bear this out, showing a nine percent rise in the value of the vinyl hardware market last year...

With this in mind, we felt it was time to take a fresh look at one of the most hotly contested areas of the market - the sub £1,500 mark. New models are crowding into this area all the time, each with their own particular selling points and musical direction, and we have lined up models from Scheu Analog, Thorens, Pro-Ject, The Funk Firm, Avid and Acoustic Solid in order to gauge what's available. Finally - and this is something we are often asked by readers - just how much of an improvement will shelling out this sort of cash bring you, over an excellent budget staple such as the classic and recently updated Rega P3-24 at around one third of the price? Read on to find out...



#### REFERENCE SYSTEM

Goldring 2500 cartridge  
Whest Two phono stage  
Naim SuperNait amplifier  
Ferrograph S1 loudspeakers

#### THE CONTENDERS

Scheu Analog Cello/RB250	£1,000	p16
Thorens TD700	£1,099	p17
Pro-Ject 6 PerspeX	£1,250	p18
The Funk Firm Vector II/Funk RB250	£1,310	p19
Avid Diva II/Jelco SA250-ST	£1,400	p20
Acoustic Solid Classic Wood/RB300	£1,500	p21



## AVID DIVA II/JELCO SA-250ST £1,300

**T**his is the latest incarnation of Avid's entry-level turntable, boasting a subplatter that spins on the same sapphire bearing as the more expensive models, and the main chassis is still a one-piece casting, carefully designed to minimise the transmission of vibration. The Avid's motor is a standalone device, powered by an external power supply and giving two speeds via a stepped pulley. As the motor is an AC synchronous type, there is no speed adjustment as such, but fine tuning may be achieved by physically moving the motor closer to, or further away from, the subplatter. On top of the subplatter sits the main platter – an MDF item topped with a fixed cork-based mat – and this is again carefully designed so that, in partnership with the screw-down record clamp, any vibrations can be safely channelled away from the stylus as it tracks the record.

The Diva II was fitted with the optional Jelco SA-250ST arm. This is a straight arm with integral fixed headshell and is mounted onto the Diva, which sports an SME arm mount, by a very nicely machined adaptor plate. I don't know if Avid are planning to offer this plate as a standalone accessory, but it's certainly a handy gadget to have. As to build quality of the deck and arm, I think it is probably sufficient to say they are virtually of SME standard – no more need be said!

### SOUND QUALITY

This is a turntable that has no time for loudspeaker or room boundaries, and simply elbows them aside as if they are not there. Some decks pull the soundstage out into the room and some push it off into the distance, but the Avid seems to have perfected the trick of doing both. It really is a room-filler and is quite staggeringly detailed across the midband and treble.

What this means is the Diva II simply picks you up and plonks you into the concert hall or studio, and lets you hear every little nuance and inflection of what is going on. Cathy Dennis's vocals from the acapella version of 'Too Many Walls' had

the hairs on the back of my neck standing up, they were so vivid and lifelike, and the guitar being played at the far left of the soundstage in the Eagles 'Long Road Out of Eden' seemed to be coming from my bathroom!

I was also delighted that I had finally found a low end companion that wasn't making me wish for the sheer power of my Garrard 301. The Avid's low end is the best you'll find at this price point, being confident, rhythmical and yet also deep and clean when required. This means that it never leaves you feeling that perhaps you are missing out on the end of the spectrum that is the foundation of the music.

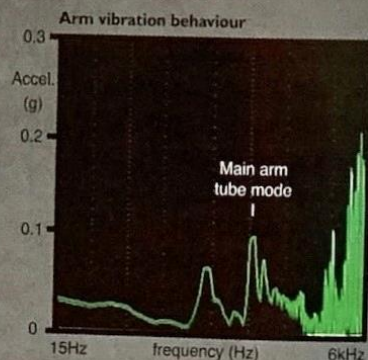
### MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Diva II's Jelco SA-250ST arm looks conventional enough but performs better than most. Its main arm tube mode is very well suppressed, suggesting it will possess a wide stereo stage at lower frequencies, plus good bass dynamics. The headshell is well damped too and resonance-free compared to most, our accelerometer measurement of vibration shows. So the Jelco performs a lot better than looks suggest!

The turntable is flutter-free, but a low rate wow component below 2Hz affects the wow and flutter figure a little, leading to an unweighted value of 0.36% and a weighted value of 0.094%, both good but unexceptional. Speed was accurate, a negligible +0.2% error being recorded.

This combo measured well and will certainly sound good in use. NK

#### ARM VIBRATION



#### SPEED STABILITY



#### VERDICT

Stylish and superbly built, the translucent sounding Diva turns in a performance that belies its price tag.

**AVID DIVA II/JELCO SA-250ST** £1,300

Avid Hi-Fi  
+44(0)1480 457300  
www.avidhifi.co.uk

**FOR**  
superb bass  
excellent imagery  
mid and treble detail  
build quality

**AGAINST**  
nothing at the price

The aim of this test was to take a known starting point, in the form of a well regarded £400 turntable, and to see what improvements could be obtained by increasing the budget spent to beyond £1,000, and just how those improvements manifested themselves. Ultimately it proved interesting for me, as I personally felt that all the dearer contenders improved on the Rega P3-24 but, by offering such different characteristics to it, there is the slim possibility that not all may see it this way. The Rega is a very good turntable and some might consider the changes gained to be not worth the extra outlay. After all, that £600 difference can buy an awful lot of vinyl!

First to consider is the Scheu Analog Cello, closest in price to the Rega but still a sizeable step ahead. Frankly, as per the dealer Diamond, one of my personal favourite turntables, I can only marvel at the sheer amount of good design and superb manufacturing that Scheu Analog have managed to fit in for the price. The fit, finish and detailing of the Cello would not look out of place on a deck double the price and it has that hewn-from-solid feel that suggests it will keep on spinning silently and reliably forever.

In sonic terms it leaps ahead of the Rega for me by the way in which it pulls music out of the loudspeakers. The P3-24 sounds rather two dimensional by comparison, and its full low end starts to sound a little loose when compared to the control and firmness offered by the Scheu. Ultimately, it gives a little away to the Rega across the midband by occasionally sounding slightly jumbled, and I wonder if a better arm might help here, and I'd be keen to try out that blue version with the Jelco arm! All in all though, this is a fine turntable and good value for money.

Heading a little further eastward in Europe, we find the contenders from Litovel, namely the Pro-Ject and Thorens decks. Unsurprisingly, these are both quite similar in character, but have certain elements of their design that means they do have some subtle differences. Considering the Thorens first, this is a well balanced deck with fine levels of enthusiasm and gusto. It is never flustered and always an enjoyably enthusiastic performer, but without falling apart when asked to play subtly and quietly. Ultimately its rather vibrationally 'lively' arm seems to limit bass performance but, considering its overall performance, plus simplicity of setup and use, and you have another

turntable that is definitely worth shortlisting.

Spending an extra £150 on its stablemate, the Pro-Ject 6 PerspeX, would therefore seem questionable but personally I think the extra outlay is worth it. The Pro-Ject just adds that extra sense of solidity to the soundstage arrangements that it sets up and seems better able to outline the leading edges of transients to result in a finer level of detail. The Thorens is certainly no slouch in this area but the Pro-Ject just finely etches everything a bit better and adds in a decent level of bass detail that the TD700 cannot quite match. Interestingly both decks offer a fulsome sense of low end weight, but both lag behind the best in terms of precision and impact

"the Avid is poised, sophisticated and blessed of the sort of scale, grandeur and authority that usually commands a much higher price tag..."

in this area, although the Pro-Ject's carbon fibre arm seems slightly better at retrieving detail. Ultimately however, both are satisfying musical companions and again leave the Rega behind in a number of key areas.

However, if you want a musical companion that is a little more than 'satisfying' then you'd be best off taking a listen to our final three contenders. The Funk Firm Vector II for example, is a revelation – it comes in an almost absurdly small box and can easily be supported by one hand. To dismiss it as a lightweight, in either sonic or stature terms however, would be a grave mistake, as this is one seriously capable vinyl spinner. I still feel that the light platter and simple drive system lose a little to the very best in terms of sheer grunt, but the sound offered by the Vector II is so precise, detailed, spacious and blessed of such precise timing, that this really doesn't seem to matter. It's a great little turntable and, for me, leaves the Rega eating its dust.

If however, grunt is what you want, then look no further than the Acoustic Solid. You could fit about three Funk Firm Vector IIs into the box it comes in, and it really is a case of Solid by name and solid by



nature. This is a deck that majors on impact, punch and drive; I remember listening to it and being impressed by this aspect of its performance first time round, but the updated motor controller really has given it

a more purposeful sense of control and fluidity across the upper bass and midband, making it more of a complete whole as a vinyl spinner. Although different characters, either this or the Funk could easily have walked off with top spot.

The trouble is, for these two decks at least, the Avid Diva II wasn't having any of it. This is my second encounter with the Avid Diva II and it again astounded me by simply doing such a passable impression of its bigger brothers, and at a markedly lower price! The deck is poised, sophisticated and blessed of the sort of scale, grandeur and authority that usually commands a much higher price tag. The Funk Vector II may well have pushed my loudspeakers out of the way to fill my room with sound, but the Diva seemed to push my entire listening room aside, judging by the way in which I found myself suddenly enveloped in sonic bliss. As far as I am concerned, the Diva II leads the field at its price point, and is more than capable enough to worry decks bearing even bigger price tags. Our budget reference Rega P3-24 is indeed a modern classic, but if there is any justice, I feel that the Avid Diva II should be regarded in the same way in twenty years time.